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"I've Devoted My Entire Life to My Daughter—and She Knows It": Exploration of Identity Development Among Now-Adult Navajo Native American Adolescent Mothers

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Abstract

In 1992 (*n* = 21) and 1995 (*n* = 8), the principal investigator collected data from 29 reservation-residing Navajo Native American teenage mothers. A primary goal of the 1992 and 1995 investigations (Time 1) was to examine the identity status of the young women in relation to commitment to the maternal role using Marcia's (1980) framework. Results revealed that an approximately equal number of participants could be classified as achieved, moratorium, foreclosed, and diffused (see Dalla, 2000). In 2007 (Time 2), the principal investigator returned to collect follow-up data at the Navajo Reservation, where she interviewed 21 (72%) of the original 29 women. Using a qualitative research strategy, the primary goal of this investigation was to examine developmental trajectories of participants' identity status in relation to four significant life domains (i.e., maternity, intimate relationships, work/occupation, and culture). The frequencies of the identity achievement status were higher at Time 2 than at Time 1, and this identity status was also more stable than the other statuses. Findings supported the expectation that presence in the identity achievement status would be positively associated with well-being, whereas the identity diffusion status has a negative association with such functioning. The authors discuss suggestions for continued research and application of findings.

In the United States, adolescent parenting comprises an issue of significant societal concern with public perceptions largely based "… on negative and often deviant images of adolescent mothers" (Prettyman, 2005, p. 156). These images promote stereotypes of youth incapable of assuming the parenting role with any semblance of competence or success (Luker, 1996). In the 1980s and 1990s in particular, the national dialogue surrounding adolescent parenting reached a crescendo and resulted in a surge of literature devoted to adolescent parents (mothers especially) and their children. Despite the breadth of research, the majority of studies included Black, White, and, to a lesser extent, Latina youth. It was within this context that the stage was set for an investigation of Navajo Native American adolescent mothers nearly two decades ago. Navajo youth were specifically targeted for an investigation of identity for two reasons. First, at that time, no literature existed on this population of teenage mothers, despite rates of childbearing on the Navajo Reservation triple national statistics (see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1991). Second, the reservation context — characterized by rampant alcoholism, poverty, and educational underachievement — was assumed to present enormous challenges to young mothers by limiting opportunities for *exploration* (a critical component in reaching an *achieved* identity status).

The goal of the original study was to examine the youths' self-perceptions as mothers given the developmentally off-time nature of their transition to parenting. The present investigation, nearly 15-years after the original, builds upon the earlier work by focusing on multiple facets of identity among the (now-adult) Navajo mothers. The study is based in the theoretical work of Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1966). Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development proposes that identity consolidation is the major task during adolescence; a bipolar outcome (i.e., identity consolidation vs. role confusion) is expected as one leaves the second decade of life. Marcia (1966) expanded Erikson's (1968) theory by proposing four distinctly different identity statuses to which an individual could be assigned (i.e., *achievement, moratorium, foreclosure*, and *diffusion*) on the basis of the presence or absence of exploration and role commitment. Identity *achievement* involves an exploration of alternatives and a commitment to one or more roles. *Moratorium* involves an exploration of alternatives without commitment to any, whereas *foreclosure* involves role commitment in the absence of exploration of alternatives. Last, identity *diffusion* involves

a lack of role commitment as well as a lack of exploration. This model formed the foundation for the present investigation. A brief literature review frames the investigation.

Identity and Adolescent Parenting

Developing a coherent and integrated sense of self, the primary task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968), can be significantly challenged by new roles — particularly if those roles are unexpected, developmentally off-time, and not socially sanctioned (Kelly, 2000). However, according to Marcia (1966) and others (e.g., Anthis, 2002), major life changes are often occasions for intraindividual transitions from one identity status to another (e.g., from moratorium to achieved or vice versa). Assuming a parenting role during adolescence, particularly if that role is unexpected, may trigger such a transition. However, the exact nature of a teenage parent's identity status transitioning is debatable. According to some (e.g., Prettyman, 2005; Rolfe, 2008), the transition to maternity during adolescence motivates some to negotiate better life positions for themselves (e.g., through educational commitments) because of their new parenting responsibilities. In contrast, making lifelong role commitments too early (e.g., a commitment to parenting), without the necessary period of exploration needed for optimal identity outcomes, could result in a foreclosed identity status (Marcia, 1966) and attenuate optimal developmental outcomes. The original investigation (Dalla, 2000) was meant to examine the extent to which the adolescent Navajo mothers defined themselves—with the assumption that reflective commitment to the maternal role (i.e., *achieved* identity status) would result in better long-term developmental outcomes for the young women as well as for their children.

Content of Adult Identity

Despite the breadth of the adolescent parenting literature, longitudinal studies—particularly those following young mothers into adulthood—are rare, with the majority of follow-up investigations focusing exclusively on the first 3 years after childbirth (Jenkins, Shapka, & Sorenson, 2006; Lindhorst & Oxford, 2008). Further, only one examination of identity among former adolescent mothers could be located. In her 12-year follow-up investigation, Smithbattle (2005) described

mothering, intimate love, and work as primary in the lives of the adult women. Her identification of parenting, love, and work as prominent life domains among former adolescent mothers is consistent with the identity literature. Specifically, for the majority of adults, vocational and interpersonal roles constitute some of the most salient aspects of their lives, with the third and fourth decades of life devoted to completing educational goals, establishing a career, finding a life partner and beginning a family (Kroger, 2007). In other words, most individuals gravitate toward the same prominent life domains in the decades following adolescence. Further, these same life domains appear prominent regardless of whether or not one's transition to maternity was expected or unexpected and developmentally on or off time. It is also important to point out that issues like spirituality, cultural heritage, and ethnicity may be quite salient given ecological context and family expectations (Kotre & Hall, 1997). Members of ethnic minority groups, for example, could be expected to have a stronger cultural identity than those of the dominant ethnic groups. Thus, building upon the original study, the first goal of this investigation was to examine, using a qualitative methodology, the developmental changes in participants' identity status in relation to four life domains: maternity, intimate relationships, work/occupation, and culture. A second goal was to determine the frequencies of the identity statuses in these domains at the two points in time covered in this research.

Identity Reconstruction

Although adolescence is the period usually associated with identity development (Erikson, 1968); it is widely agreed that identity development does not cease after the second decade of life and is a lifelong process punctuated by reconstruction. Reconstruction is particularly evident at Erikson's three adult psychosocial stages. Marcia (2002) explained, "Each stage involves a reformulation of identity as one responds to the demands and rewards of each developmental era" (pp. 14–15). However, additional disequilibrating circumstances (e.g., falling in love, divorce, loss of a loved one, promotion/ job loss, spiritual crises), beyond normal transitions from one psychosocial stage to the next, may also result in identity reconstruction. For instance, Anthis (2002) found significant life events (i.e., divorce, loss of job) predicted increases in identity exploration (i.e., moratorium) and decreases in

identity commitment (e.g., achievement). Grounded in the available literature on adult identity, the third goal of this investigation was to examine continuity (i.e., relative stability) in participants' identity statuses, over time in each of the four prominent life domains; we hypothesized that a great deal of continuity would be found for each participant across the four life domains.

Identity Status, Psychosocial Well-Being, and Significant Life Events

Burton (1990, p. 123) described teenage childbearing among low-income, multigeneration Black families as an "alternative life course strategy"; a strategy created in response to significant socio-environmental constraints (e.g., poverty, substandard education). Supported by more recent research, it has become increasingly clear that the social, physical, economic, and cultural contexts in which young women become pregnant, give birth, and raise their children may have a more significant effect on developmental outcomes than maternal age, per se (Geronimus, 2004; Turley, 2003). Yet, a "near-universal perspective [exists] that teenage mothering is a non-normative life event that results in negative long-term consequences for mother and child" (Smithbattle, 2005, p. 831). Because of the contradictions in the teenage parenting literature, we deemed it important to examine participants' well-being. On the basis of Erikson's (1968) assertions that a well-developed identity promotes an inner sense of well-being, the fourth goal of this research was to examine the associations between indices of psychosocial well-being with the expectation that there were would be positive association for the identity achievement status and negative associations with identity diffusion.

Setting the Context: The Navajo Reservation

The Navajo Reservation is the second-largest Native American Indian reservation in the United States, encompassing more than 26,000 square miles (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2003). It is an exceptionally rural landscape, with population centers around schools, hospitals, trading posts, or chapter houses. Reservation residents face multiple social and economic challenges. Unemployment, for example, is rampant on the Navajo Reservation with current rates at 51% (Navajo Division

of Economic Development, 2009); approximately 56% of reservation residents live below the poverty line (Arizona Cooperative Extension, 2008). Although alcohol sales are illegal on the Navajo Reservation, rates of alcoholism are six times higher than those of national statistics (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Some believe a return to traditional practices is a promising means to helping Native American communities overcome significant social and environmental challenges. However, for many tribes—including the Navajo—traditional practices are rapidly devolving. The number of Navajo first-grade students who only speak English is four times higher than it was in 1970 (Indian Country Diaries, 2006). It was with this ecological context in mind that the original study (conducted in 1992 and 1995) was conceived. To summarize, the present investigation builds upon that earlier work and was intended to examine (a) developmental movement with respect to the participants' identity statuses in relation to four significant life domains using qualitative research methods, (b) the relative frequency of the identity statuses at Time 1 and Time 2, (c) identity status continuity (relative stability) across the two points of data collection, and (d) the relationships of identity statuses with indicators of psychological well-being and the frequency of significant life events.

Method

Procedures

Because this investigation builds upon the original study, a brief review of how Time 1 data were collected is in order.

Time 1

In 1992, survey and interview data were collected from 21 Navajo adolescent mothers living in a small reservation community. In 1995, the principal investigator (R.L.D.) returned to the Navajo Reservation and collected survey and interview data from 8 additional adolescent mothers in an adjacent community. With the help of a Navajo assistant, participants were recruited through local high schools, through

alternative educational programs, and by word of mouth. All data were collected in private (e.g., classroom) after obtaining parental consent and youth assent. The investigation focused on social support, identity, and parenting challenges. Data collection lasted about 3 weeks each in 1992 and 1995. All participants agreed to be contacted in the future for a follow-up interview. For present purposes, 1992 and 1995 data are collectively referred to as *Time 1*.

Time 2

In 2007, the principal investigator returned to the Navajo Reservation to collect follow-up data. With the help of the director of an alternative education program in one of the original communities, participants were located through extended family, places of employment, and by word of mouth. Of the original 29 women, 22 were located and 2 declined to participate. In the summer of 2008, the principal investigator again returned to the Navajo Reservation and interviewed another one of the original 29 women, for a total sample of 21. All data were collected in private (e.g., participant's home) by the principal investigator. The goals and methods were explained to each participant; each read and signed a consent form (and received a copy), and was then assigned an identification number. Participants completed a series of self-report survey indices and then engaged in an in-depth, audio-recorded interview. Data collection lasted about 3 hours with each participant (range = 1.5–3.5 hours); participants were compensated with US$30 for their time.

Trustworthiness

Triangulation of method was achieved through the mixed-method approach; when interview and survey data conflicted (e.g., indication of abuse on the life events scale but not mentioned in the interview) discrepancies were addressed in the interview. A member check procedure was also used. Before conducting each interview, the principal investigator read original transcripts from Time 1. At Time 2, each participant was asked to describe issues (e.g., social support, residence) surrounding her adolescent transition to maternity. In all cases, the original transcripts (Time 1) corresponded with participants' Time 2 descriptions. Last, during the interviews, the principal investigator

interpreted participants' statements; when misunderstandings occurred, additional information or clarification was requested.

Participants

The final sample consisted of 21 women (72% of the original 29). At Time 2, participants ranged in age from 28 to 37 years (M = 31.8 years). In sum, they had 88 children (M = 4.2; range = 1–9) not including current pregnancies (n = 3). Children ranged in age from 7 months to 21 years (M = 10 years), and 4 had children of their own (i.e., 4 participants were grandmothers). Most (86%) had either completed high school or earned a general equivalency degree. Years of formal education varied appreciably, from 10 years to 16 years (M = 13.4 years). Two participants had received a nursing degree, 8 had completed college earning a bachelor's degree, and 1 had earned a master's degree (see Table 1 for complete demographic data at Time 1 and Time 2).

Instrumentation

Identity Status Interview

Interviews were semi-structured and designed to explore developmental trajectories, life transitions, and the self-conceptions in relation to maternity, intimate partnerships, work/occupation, and culture. Interviews were transcribed; each transcript was individually coded by the principal investigator and at least one research assistant. Using Marcia's (1966) paradigm, participants were classified into a specific identity status for each of the four life domains examined (i.e., maternity, intimate partner relationships, work/ occupation, and culture). Participants were coded as *identity achieved* if they described role commitment as well as a period of exploration, *moratorium* if they described a current state of exploration without role commitment; *foreclosed* if they had made a role commitment without prior exploration; and *diffused* if they described neither commitment nor exploration.

Perceived Social Support

The Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire (Norbeck, Lindsey, & Carrieri, 1982) asks participants to list up to six network members. All

Table 1. Demographic Data: Time 1 and Time 2

Variable	Time 1 (n=21)[a]	Time 2 (n=21)
Age		
M (*SD*)	17.4 (1.07)	31.8 (2.14)
Range	16–20 28–37	
Number of children	25	88
Per-participant *M* (*SD*)	1.2 (0.51)	4.2 (1.82)
Range	1–3	1–9
Currently pregnant (*n*)	1	3
Currently a grandmother (*n*)	—	4
Children's age		
M (*SD*)	10.4 months (0.50)	10 years (2.32)
Years of education completed		
M (*SD*)	10.5 (0.82)	13.4 (1.80)
Range	9–12	10–16
Dropped out (*n*)	3	5
Dropped out and returned	6	6
Received general equivalency diploma	—	2
Marital status		
Married or partnered	18	16
Single	2	2
Divorced	1	2
Widowed	0	1
Length of current partnership		
M (*SD*)	2.9 years (1.8)	13.2 years (4.63)
Range	10 months–5.8 years	2 months–23 years
Children's fathers' ages		
M (*SD*)	21.1 years (1.3)	
Range	17–36 years	
Residence (*n*)		
Husband or partner	1	14
Partner and his family	3	1
Family of origin	10	3
Other	7	2
Alone with children	—	2
Employed (*n*)		
Self	5	14
Partner	12	9
Main source of income[b]		
Family of origin	13	—
Own employment	3	14
Partner	9	5
Public assistance	17	3
Annual family income (*n*)		
<$10,000	11	6
$10,000–$19,999	5	—
$20,000–$29,999	2	6
$30,000–$39,999	—	6
$40,000–$49,999	—	—
>$50,000	—	3
Unknown	3	—

a. Reflects only those participants located and interviewed at Time 1 and Time 2.
b. Participants could select multiple sources of income.

questions are then answered on the basis of each individual's network using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). Total support is obtained by summing all items, for each network member, and dividing by the total number of network members, with scores ranging from 7 to 35. The scale demonstrates high consistency and reliability (.85 to .92).

Self-Esteem

The Index of Self-Esteem (Hudson, 1997) is a 25-item instrument to assess self-esteem. Each item is scored using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*none of the time*) to 7 (*all of the time*). After reverse-coding 13 items, all are summed. The Index of Self-Esteem demonstrates excellent internal consistency (.93) and can significantly distinguish clients judged by clinicians to have problems in the area of self-esteem.

Life Distress

The Life Distress Inventory (Thomas, Yoshioka, & Ager, 1994) measures distress across multiple life domains (the total scale scores—not subscale scores—were used). Participants indicate level of distress to 18 items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*no distress*) to 5 (*extremely distressed*). All items are then summed with total scores ranging from 18 to 90; higher scores indicate greater distress. The scale demonstrates good test–retest reliability (r = .66) and internal consistency (.85).

Symptoms of Depression

We used the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988), a 21-item self-report inventory, to assess symptoms of depression. Response choices range from 0 to 3 with total scale scores ranging from 0 to 63. Scores of 16 or higher indicate moderate to severe symptoms of depression.

Significant Life Events

To assess significant life events, we used a 26-item revised version of the Family Inventory of Life Events (Olson et al., 1982). Participants simply check all items (e.g., divorce, victim of violence) experienced

within the past 12 months. If an event occurred, it was assigned a "1"; otherwise, it was assigned a "0." Items were them summed with total scores ranging from 0 to 26; higher scores indicate more life events and the potential for greater stress.

Data Analyses

Qualitative interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Aronson, 1994). The process began by thoroughly reading and then re-reading all interviews (i.e., protocols) and then extracting patterns of experience (i.e., themes) related to the phenomenon of interest (e.g., identity status). Next, themes were expounded by adding all information from the transcribed interviews that related to already classified patterns. This step is particularly important as participants often return to, or expound upon, significant issues throughout the course of an interview. Related patterns are then combined and catalogued into subthemes. Analyses of transcripts, including coding and identifying participants' identity statuses, were discussed in semiweekly meetings between the principal investigator and four research assistants. When coding discrepancies arose, transcripts were re-examined until coding agreement (i.e., identity status assignments) was reached. Survey data were checked for errors and analyzed using SPSS-19.

Results

Goal 1: Examining Developmental Changes in the Participants' Identity Statuses in Four Life Domains Using Qualitative Methods

Maternity

At Time 1, most participants (n = 17; 81%) indicated that their pregnancies were unexpected and unplanned, and thus, one might assume all 17 were foreclosed with respect to the maternal role. However, after learning of their pregnancies, 3 of the 17 had strongly considered adoption or abortion and 4 had planned their pregnancies. These 7 youth then experienced a period of exploration before assuming the maternal role. Further, they described being fully committed to parenting, being their children's primary caregivers, and

as making conscious decisions about other areas of their lives (e.g., school) on the basis of their maternal role commitments. To illustrate, Karen explained her rationale for graduating from high school: "I didn't want to be a welfare-dependent mom. . . and it had to be a diploma—not a [general equivalency diploma]." Thus, 7 individuals were classified as achieved with respect to the maternal role at Time 1. Of the remaining 14 individuals, 3 were classified as diffused (i.e., maternity was not chosen, and they demonstrated lack of commitment to the role), 3 as being in a state of moratorium (i.e., in a state of searching for a balance between being a mother and a carefree teenager) and 8 as foreclosed (i.e., committed to maternity only without any exploration of alternatives to the role). For complete details, see Dalla (2000).

At Time 2, participants evidenced *commitment* if (a) the maternal role was a central defining feature of her life and (b) if they were actively engaged in maternal activities (e.g., physical and emotional caregiving). *Exploration* was a substantially more difficult concept to define because the women were already mothers. Thus, after much discussion, we agreed that evidence of exploration existed if participants (a) described choosing their children, or the maternal role, over other adult roles (e.g., intimate partners); and (b) made major life changes in order to be more committed to the maternal role or to be better parents. On the basis of these guidelines, 16 participants were classified as achieved, 2 as being in a state of moratorium, 1 as foreclosed, and 2 others as diffused (see Table 2 for identity status comparisons between Time 1 and Time 2 across all life domains). Each of the achieved participants described the maternal role as a defining feature of her life and as a role which influenced other adult roles in which she was engaged (e.g., work, intimate partnerships). The achieved mothers' dedication to their children was readily apparent—their children's well-being took precedence over every other aspect of their lives. In addition, achieved mothers described making difficult life decisions, and often creating new lifestyles to promote their children's short- and long-term well-being. For some individuals, this involved changing long-established family patterns. For example, Sharron was raised in a home where alcohol abuse was normative and pervasive. As an adult, she too began abusing alcohol. Then, an incident involving her son changed everything. She explained:

Table 2. Identity Status Classifications at Time 1 and Time 2, by Respondent

	Time 1				Time 2			
	Maternity	*Intimate Partner Relationships*	*Work/ Occupation*	*Culture*	*Maternity*	*Intimate Partner Relationships*	*Work/ Occupation*	*Culture*
Karen	A	A	D	A	A	M	A	A
Shannon	M	A	D	D	A	F	A	D
Carli	F	D	D	F	F	M	M	F
Erica	A	D	D	F	A	M	D	F
Chelly	D	A	D	D	D	D	D	D
Robyn	A	A	D	A	A	A	A	A
Kassi	M	M	D	M	A	A	A	A
Megan	D	A	D	D	D	A	D	D
Merlinda	F	A	D	F	A	A	A	A
Anita	F	A	D	M	A	F	A	D
Tanisha	F	A	D	F	A	M	A	D
Kari	D	A	D	F	A	M	A	D
Yanette	A	A	D	F	A	A	A	A
Josetta	A	A	D	A	A	F	A	F
Passilla	A	A	D	A	A	A	A	A
Melissa	F	A	D	M	M	F	A	D
Danielle	F	A	D	M	A	M	A	A
Natina	F	A	D	F	A	A	D	F
Janicia	F	A	D	M	A	A	A	F
Yvonne	M	A	D	M	M	A	A	F
Tanya	A	A	D	M	A	F	A	F

A = achieved; D = diffused; F = foreclosed; M = moratorium.

> I came [home] early in the morning—staggered in. And my son was up. He saw me. The next day, he started making fun of me, saying things and showing me what I was doing. Right there it was like a slap in my face. I promised myself I would never have my kids see me that way again. So I stopped. I straightened up right there. "No more," I thought, "I don't want to be like this."

Given prevalence rates of alcoholism on the Navajo Reservation, it was not surprising to learn that others too, including Karen, Erica, and Josetta also experienced periods of excessive alcohol use—but, like Shannon, they each described how the desire to be strong role models for their children provided the impetus to stop drinking.

Furthermore, 8 of the 16 achieved mothers made difficult but conscious decisions to end intimate partner relationships for the sake of their children. Often, these decisions were based on the presence of family violence; the mothers did not want their children exposed to

such devastating family dynamics. In nine other cases, achieved mothers consciously chose to leave male partners because of their limited family contributions. Tanisha, for example, left her partner of 10 years and father of her four sons because of his pervasive unemployment. When asked about his role in the family, she replied: "He signed the birth certificates—that's it. I did everything else. He never worked. Still doesn't." Similarly, Karen ended two intimate relationships because the men chose to be "out with friends" rather than working and Danielle's 7-year relationship to the father of her children ended because he "… was more geared toward dancing, friends, [and] partying."

Last, the 16 achieved mothers described active and sustained involvement in their children's lives—a pattern which continued despite their children being adolescents and largely self-sufficient. Focusing on communication and supporting their children's actions and activities were primary ways in which these women maintained strong relationships with their growing kids. To illustrate, in describing her current relationship with her 16-yearold son, one stated: "Every day I ask him what's going on in school, what's going on with this or that … and I just try to support them [kids] in everything they do." Not surprising, given their histories with adolescent parenting, the issue of sex was of particular concern. They readily described monitoring their children's activities as well as talking to their children about sex and contraception. Kassi's conversation with her 16-year-old son illustrates:

> And I said, "If you don't know how to use a condom, I'll show you." I said, "You know, your dad's not here to show you these things … and there's some things that you're not gonna want to come to me for, but I'm letting you know you can always come to me."

In a similar vein, Kari described recent conversations with her oldest daughter as follows:

> She knows I had her when I was very young. I tell her my struggles, I tell her how hard it was—what I missed out on. But [I also tell her], "You're the one [who] actually made me a stronger person. You made me grow up faster and you made me realize what I needed to do to my life."

Overall, the achieved mothers described making the maternal role their first priority, being actively engaged in parenting, and, most important, making tough life decisions to promote their children's well-being.

In contrast, Yvonne and Melissa were classified as in a state of moratorium with respect to the maternal role. Three issues compelled this classification. First, neither woman was actively parenting at Time 2. Melissa had lost custody of her children after a long legal battle and Yvonne left her children with extended family on the reservation, to be with her husband who worked construction in Nebraska, Mississippi, and Colorado. Second, for both women, adult roles other than maternity took precedence. Melissa described her life as centered on her nursing career and a newly developing intimate relationship; Yvonne's life focused on her husband—and monitoring his behavior. She described a recent incident when he drank an 18-pack of beer "… and I was like, 'You know, you [husband] gotta work tomorrow.' " She then stated: "He has to work because I'm not working … So I have to be here to try and be the mom [of my husband] and the wife at the same time." Last, both appeared uncertain about the maternal role. Although they described a desire to actively resume parenting, it was unclear when (or whether) such would occur.

Only Carli was classified as foreclosed in her maternal identity at Time 2. Carli was unique for several reasons. First, she was the only participant with only one child. Second, she had never established a relationship with her daughter's father, and she had been single most of her life. Third, despite a 4-year degree in accounting, Carli was unemployed and not looking for work. Carli also evidenced little interest in any activities other than parenting; she lived with her mother, daughter, and grandson and her sole identity appeared to revolve around parenting—first to her daughter and more recently to her grandson. She clearly articulated the centrality of maternity in her life, in the absence of any other adult roles, when she stated: "I've *devoted* my entire life to my daughter—and she knows it" [*emphasis added*].

In sharp contrast, two others stood out because neither appeared committed to or invested in the maternal role and further, neither appeared interested in changing that. Chelly's situation is illustrative and depicts a long history of parental passivity. Several years earlier, Chelly's children were legally removed from her care because of her

excessive alcohol use and child neglect. She regained custody after attending court-ordered counseling, but her lack of parental involvement was evident in her complacency regarding her teenage daughter who, at 16 years of age, had two children of her own. When asked about contraception, Chelly remarked, "Yeah, she's [daughter] *gonna get* that IUD [intrauterine device] in her … I think it's a good idea because her boyfriend comes over and sleeps here and then takes off." The pattern of teenage parenting was intergenerational and Chelly, as a parental figure, appeared disinterested in taking action or helping her daughter take action—to prevent additional pregnancies. Chelly's limited involvement was further evident in that, while being interviewed at Time 2, she allowed her 5-year-old son to play in the hotel parking lot—apparently oblivious to the dangerous situation.

Intimate Partnerships

At Time 1, most (n = 18) participants considered themselves married or in a marriage-like relationship, and most of these (n = 15) reported serious, long-term relationships (from 10 months to 5 years) before becoming pregnant. Thus, it appeared that the majority of the young women were with their partners because they wanted to be and not because of a pregnancy. Taken together, this suggests that these women had an achieved identity status with regard to intimate partner relationships at Time 1. The remaining three women were not involved in an intimate relationship with their children's fathers. Two of the three were not interested in developing an intimate partnership (i.e., diffused) and the final young woman was single, but desperately wanted to be with a partner. When asked what would make her life easier, she replied, "A guy!" She was thus classified as being in a state of moratorium.

At Time 2, 9 participants were classified as achieved, 6 as in a state of moratorium, 5 as foreclosed, and 1 as diffused with regard to intimate love relationships. Those who were classified as achieved described a strong commitment to their partners and to a conscious decision to be with those particular men, rather than to be single or with anyone else. This is not to say that these relationships were not without emotional upheaval. However, it was particularly interesting to note that, for many of the achieved women, relationship difficulties often became pivotal moments highlighting not only their choice in

being with a particular man, but also their commitment to him. Mer-linda's situation is a case in point. She and her partner of 15 years sep-arated for some time as a result of infidelity and alcohol abuse. The turning point was when she made a conscious decision to work on the relationship, to let him move home, and stay together. She noted, "… we worked everything out … then after that everything has been fine."

The 6 women classified as in a state of moratorium were single (typically the result of ending unhealthy, unfulfilling relationships), and uncertain as to whether or not they would pursue intimate rela-tionships in the future. In effect, they were not committed to the idea of being partnered. Carli explained: "The men I've been with—they still have the Peter Pan Syndrome—they don't want to grow up, you know? They drink too much, they don't work [and] they're not emo-tionally available." She continued: "And my daughter, she doesn't want me to be with anybody … I think she's afraid I would just leave her and her son." Carli's statements clearly indicated ambivalence with respect to men because of her own experiences as well as feelings of parental obligation.

All 5 participants categorized as foreclosed described being in un-fulfilling, difficult, and often extremely violent intimate relationships. Yet, all appeared committed to their partners despite years of turmoil. Tanya, for example, had been with the same partner for 23 years. Over the course of their marriage, her husband was steadily unem-ployed, struggled with alcohol addiction, and was often verbally abu-sive. When asked how they had stayed together for so long, Tanya re-sponded, "I have no idea." Of the 5 individuals who were categorized as foreclosed, 3 had tried to leave their partners but then returned because they felt they had no other option. Anita's situation is illus-trative. As was Tanya, she had been with the same partner since ado-lescence (i.e., 17 years) and, also like Tanya, Anita's husband was un-employed, an alcoholic, and physically and emotionally abusive. She had left him numerous times only to return after he begged her for-giveness. She remained in the relationship because, she explained, she felt she had nowhere to go and she was afraid of what he would do to her or their children if she ended the relationship permanently. In other words—she felt she had no other choices. Thus, she was deter-mined to stay with him and make the most of a very difficult situation.

The final participant, Chelly, was classified as diffused with re-gard to intimate partnerships. At Time 2, her husband of 15 years was

in prison for sexually molesting his niece. Despite this and his propensity for violence, Chelly appeared unable to make a decision as to whether or not the relationship would resume after his impending release. When asked if she would take him back, she replied: "I'm trying to think about it ... my kids want him back. I guess if he wants to live with me that's okay . . . We're having money problems right now." This statement clearly indicates lack of conscious decision making—she is, in effect, allowing her children's desires and her financial dependency determine her intimate partner status—and further, with a man who poses significant threats to the well-being of Chelly and her children. Furthermore, Chelly had a child with another man during her husband's incarceration; it was a short-lived sexual relationship only. Chelly's words and actions suggest that she lacks commitment to her ex-husband and was not actively searching for a partner, yet she was not content with singlehood. Instead, she approached intimate partnerships reactively, and in a manner devoid of initiative, thus her classification as diffused.

Work/Occupation

Comparisons in work status and income generation between Time 1 and Time 2 revealed an interesting pattern. As expected at Time 1, few (n = 5, or 24%) were employed and none were employed full time (see Table 1). Given their youth, limited education, and recent transition to maternity, all relied on others for financial assistance. Primary sources of income included public assistance (n = 17, or 81%), family of origin (n = 13, or 62%), and/or male partners (n = 9, or 43%). In terms of occupational identity status, the women were classified as diffused because none had experienced a period of searching or had made any career commitments.

At Time 2, the women's sources of income had changed dramatically as the majority (n = 14, or 67%) designated themselves as their family's primary source of income. Yet, given the exceptionally high rates of unemployment, work was difficult to find. Participants frequently commented: "There really are no jobs here" or "On the reservation, if you want a job, you have to be related to or close friends with someone." Furthermore, reservation work clusters in the service industry (e.g., food service, housekeeping)—minimum wage jobs with few advancement opportunities. Thus, when considering

occupational identity status, we considered work ethic (i.e., employed/ not employed) rather than exploration of specific positions or career trajectories. In other words, we recognized how, on the reservation, choice in type of work was a luxury few could afford; one accepted what was available. Time 2, only 9 (56%) of the 16 male partners were employed—so nearly half ($n = 7$, or 44%) were unemployed and, according to the participants, not interested in finding work. Yet, among most participants, unemployment was not an option—they found work, even if their partners could (or would) not. The women's work ethic (finding work in an environment of destitution and limited opportunities) and persistence in maintaining employment despite the unskilled positions available led us to classify the majority ($n = 16$) as having an achieved occupational identity status. Carli, was classified as in a state of moratorium because she had attained an accounting degree (indication of desire for stable employment), yet she was unemployed and unable to find work, explaining: "I have my education, and my degrees, you know? But they still won't hire me." The remaining four participants were classified as diffused. They women were all unemployed, not looking for work, and dependent on public assistance for financial support.

Culture

In assessing cultural identity, analyses focused on (a) the extent to which participants were able to speak the Navajo language and/or were engaged in traditional cultural practices and/or ceremonies, (b) the extent to which the women expressed a desire to learn the language and/or become engaged in traditional cultural ceremonies/practices; (c) the extent to which participants sought opportunities to learn more about the Navajo culture, and (d) the extent to which the women described a desire to maintain cultural traditions by passing those practices to their children.

    At Time 1, nearly half of all participants ($n = 10$, or 48%) spoke only English; the others were bilingual (English and Navajo) although the majority of these ($n = 7$) spoke English predominantly, 3 used both languages equally, and 1 used Navajo predominantly. Seven bilingual speakers were actively involved in Navajo practices, had sought out learning opportunities (e.g., from family and medicine men), and were knowledgeable about their cultural heritage. However, most (n

= 14) had little knowledge about traditional practices and rarely, if ever, engaged in traditional events or ceremonies—and, if they did so, could not explain the significance behind the ceremony or why it was practiced. Yet, 7 of these 14 wanted to learn more about the Navajo culture and to become more actively involved. Anita's remark is illustrative: "I don't even understand Navajo [the language], and I really wish I did, ya know? I don't even know how to pray and I wish I did. I mean, this is my culture and it's powerful—it's really neat and I want to learn more about it." Thus, at Time 1, 4 participants were classified as achieved (i.e., having experienced commitment and exploration), 7 as foreclosed (i.e., expressing commitment to the Navajo culture yet demonstrating little understanding and expressing no periods of exploration), 7 were in a state of moratorium (i.e., wanting to be committed and expressing a desire to learn), and 3 were diffused (i.e., having little cultural engagement and no desire to learn about their heritage).

At Time 2, 6 individuals were classified as achieved, 8 as foreclosed, and 7 as diffused. The 6 achieved women demonstrated a deep understanding of the Navajo culture, of traditional ceremonies and practices, and frequently participated in cultural events. The Navajo culture played a significant role in their lives, all spoke the Navajo language, and all attempted to incorporate the Navajo culture into their families to maintain traditions in future generations. Natina is a case in point, although she grew up bilingual, it was not until she was an adult—and married to a man with deep respect for and understanding of the Navajo culture—that her own interest was piqued and she sought out additional learning opportunities. As an adult, she embraced her cultural heritage, and engaged in traditional ceremonies—to which she exposed her children. Karen, too, was classified as achieved. Although she lived off the reservation, she was committed to maintaining the culture (i.e., her children were learning to speak Navajo, and they frequently returned to the reservation to participate in traditional ceremonies). Despite her commitment, she was able to critically analyze the meaning behind certain belief systems or practices, as well as how those applied to her as a person, explaining: "I respect Navajo ways. But, there are some crazy parts to this Navajo [culture] that I totally disagree with."

Eight were classified as foreclosed; these women were raised in homes where Navajo was spoken and where traditions were practiced.

Table 3. Summary Identity Status Classifications at Time 1 and Time 2 Across Life Domains

	Time 1				*Time 2*			
	Achieved	*Moratorium*	*Foreclosed*	*Diffused*	*Achieved*	*Moratorium*	*Foreclosed*	*Diffused*
Maternity	7	3	8	3	16	2	1	2
Intimate partnerships	18	1	0	2	9	6	5	1
Work/occupation	0	0	0	21	16	1	0	4
Culture	4	7	7	3	6	0	8	7
Total*	29	11	15	29	47	9	14	14

* Refers to how often each identity status was assigned in the four domains covered in the interview, not to the total number of participants assigned each identity status.

Nonetheless, as adults, they intermittently participated in cultural events yet understood little of the deeper cultural meanings underlying such observances. Furthermore, none experienced a period of critical analyses or with respect to their cultural identities. Instead, they demonstrated a superficial understanding of the Navajo culture without a corresponding desire to know more. Carli's statement is illustrative:

> We [her family] observe, like, you know, when my grandson was born he was blessed and given his Navajo name. And then like the "first laugh" [traditional Navajos have a ceremony commemorating a baby's first laugh] … just the little things. But we're not really into it [Navajo culture]—we just never were.

In contrast, those individuals who were categorized as diffused (*n* = 7) had little current or past connection with the traditional Navajo culture and further, had no desire to learn more or to pass that heritage to future generations. For example, Merlinda was asked to describe her personal connection to traditional Navajo practices. She laughed briefly and then responded, "I don't really know a lot about it . . . [for me] it's just not a really big issue."

Goal 2: Examining the Frequencies of the Participants' Identity Statuses at Time 1 and Time 2

Using the information in Table 2, the frequencies of the identity status assignments within each of the four significant life domains were calculated for both data collection periods. These frequencies are

Table 4. Continuity of the Frequencies of Identity Statuses From Time 1 to Time 2

	Frequency of Statuses Represented at Time 1	Frequency of Respondents in Same Status at Time 2	Stability of Statuses Time 1 to Time 2
Achieved	29	18	62%
Moratorium	11	2	18%
Foreclosed	15	4	27%
Diffused	29	9	31%

reported in Table 3. It is evident that at Time 1 the identity achieved and diffused identity statuses were assigned most frequently (n = 29 each) and moratorium the least (n = 11) at Time 1. At Time 2, the achieved identity status was again assigned the most, and substantially more than at Time 1 (e.g., 47 vs. 29). Moreover, at Time 2 moratorium was again assigned the least (n = 9), with an equal number of assignments to the diffused and foreclosed identity statuses (n = 14, respectively), somewhat less often than they were assigned at Time 1.

Goal 3: Examining the Continuity (Relative Stability) of the Identity Statuses From Time 1 to Time 2

To examine the relative stability or continuity (i.e., being in the same identity status across time), for each identity status, we identified the number of instances in which each respondent was in the same identity status at Time 1 and Time 2 and the instances in which identity status assigned differed at the two points of data collection. This information is reported in Table 4. As anticipated, the achieved identity status evidenced the greatest continuity across time (62%) and moratorium the least (18%).

Goal 4: Examining the Relationship of the Identity Statuses With Measures of Well-Being and Frequency of Significant Life Events

To examine the relationship of the identity statuses to indicators of wellbeing and the frequency of significant life events, we generated continuous measures for each identity status by summing the number of life domains each participant was assigned to each identity status. To illustrate, Karen had an achieved identity status in three life domains (i.e., maternity, work, and culture) and was classified as

Table 5. Correlations of Identity Status Scores With Significant Life Events and Psychosocial Well-Being

Psychosocial Variable	*Identity Status*			
	Achieved	Moratorium	Foreclosed	Diffused
Significant life events	−.26	.09	.39#	−.01
Social support	.49*	−.30	.02	−.43*
Self-esteem	.40#	−17	.26	−.39#
Life distress	−.67**	.16	.26	.52**
Depression	−44*	−21	.03	.62**

# p<.08 ; * p<.05 ; ** p<.01

moratorium in the fourth domain (i.e., intimacy) (see Table 2). Thus, she received a score of 3 for achieved, 1 for moratorium, 0 for diffused, and 0 for foreclosed. Shannon, on the other hand, was classified as achieved in two domains (i.e., maternity and work/occupation), foreclosed in the intimate partner domain, and diffused in culture. Thus, she received the following scores: achieved = 2, foreclosed = 1, diffused = 1, and moratorium = 0. In this manner, continuous variables were created for the identity status classifications allowing us to run correlational analyses with the indices of significant life events and psychosocial well-being.

As evident in Table 5, all associations were in the expected directions and supported our hypotheses. Specifically, an achieved identity status was related to optimal well-being, with significant and negative associations with depression ($r = −.44, p < .05$) and life distress ($r = −.67, p < .01$), and significant positive associations with social support ($r = .49, p < .05$). Further, although not statistically significant, achieved identity was moderately positively associated ($r = .40, p < .08$) with self-esteem. In contrast, diffusion was significantly related to depressive symptomology ($r = .62, p < .01$), greater life distress ($r = .52, p < .01$), and less social support ($r = −.43, p < .05$). Diffusion was also moderately and negatively related to self-esteem ($r = −.39, p < .08$). Associations between indices of psychosocial well-being and the remaining two identity status classifications (i.e., moratorium and foreclosure) were nonsignificant.

Last, although there were no statistically significant associations between life events and the four identity statuses, participants' life event scores do inform contextual understanding of their lives. Specifically, on average, participants experienced 8.9 stressful life events

within the past year (range = 3–16), with the most frequently noted events including: increased money problems (*n* = 16), lifestyle changes (*n* = 13), separation/break up with partner (*n* = 12), close friend or family member die (*n* = 11), change in occupation or type of work (*n* = 11), and increase in arguments with partner (*n* = 11). Taken together, respondents' greatest sources of stress involved finances (e.g., money problems, change in occupation) and intimate partner relationships (i.e., separation/break ups; increases in arguments).

Discussion

The first and second goals of this investigation were addressed through the use of in-depth interviews conducted at two time points across a 15-year period, conducting qualitative and quantitative analyses of the information obtained. By all accounts, much had changed in Navajo mothers' identity in relation to three of the four significant life domains examined (i.e., all but culture). At Time 1, the achieved identity status was assigned a total of 29 times—but had increased to a total of 47 times at Time 2. The greatest movement to an achieved identity status was evident in two life domains: maternity and occupation. Perhaps, as suggested by Prettyman (2005) and Rolfe (2008), these women made conscious decisions, during the transition to maternity or soon thereafter, to commit themselves to the two roles deemed most significant in ensuring optimal outcomes for their children— mother and financial provider. At Time 1, most women admitted that their pregnancies were unplanned and unexpected. Still, the majority appeared to have made a conscious choice to assume the maternal role with commitment and vigor. Many individuals described how maternity motivated them to make additional life changes as well—changes that would promote the healthy development of their children (e.g., to finish high school or to stop partying). Furthermore, although few participants were employed at Time 1, most were the primary (and often only) sources of family income at Time 2— a role many had acquired years earlier.

Although we did not directly ask participants, it is reasonable to assume that the provider role was also consciously chosen near the transition to motherhood with the stark realization that (a) male partners were unreliable sources of income and (b) financial assistance

from kin was extremely limited in an environment marked by rampant poverty. Examining these two life domains (i.e., maternity, work/occupation), it quickly became evident that the majority were faced with few alternatives to self-reliance. Interesting too is that the number of women assigned to an achieved identity status in their intimate partnerships was reduced from 18 (at Time 1) to 9 (at Time 2). This is consistent with an internal psychological movement to greater self-reliance, rather than reliance on a male partner, with regard to child rearing and finances in particular.

Noteworthy also is that foreclosure and diffusion were assigned equally at Time 2—both 14 times—and most often in the cultural identity life domain. These results suggest, first, that cultural heritage was not a central defining feature of most participants' identities (i.e., for those who were classified as diffused), and second, even among those who verbalized a commitment to their rich Native American heritage, they frequently did so without deep understanding of or appreciation for the unique nuances of that heritage (i.e., those who were classified as foreclosed). Regardless, both identity status classifications suggest that being Native American, per se, is significantly less important in these women's developmental trajectories and senses of self than is the physical environment (i.e., Navajo Reservation) in which they reside. In other words, the challenging contextual ramifications of reservation residence (i.e., poverty, destitution) appear more significant in participants' developmental changes than the potentially positive and enriching aspects of their Navajo Native American cultural heritage. These results are unlikely related to participants' status as (former) Native American adolescent mothers and, much more likely, a result of historical and sustained marginalization of indigenous populations by the majority culture which have resulted in the erosion of traditional values (McEachern, Van Winkle, & Steiner, 1998) and dissociation from one's Native heritage (Carstarphen, 2010). Perceived discrimination and ethnic cleansing, as well as perceptions of historical loss (i.e., of one's cultural heritage) have potentially devastating effects on the psychosocial well-being and self-perceptions of indigenous populations (Crawford, 1996)—ramifications often evident in early adolescence (Whitbeck, Walls, Johnson, Morrisseau, & McDougall, 2009).

Turning attention to the third goal, we aimed to examine of the continuity of the identity statuses, that is, the stability of status assignments within domains from Time 1 to Time 2. Results of our

analyses provide clear and consistent evidence that an achieved identity status—assumed after a period of searching alternatives followed by role commitments, is the most stable status through time. On the other hand, moratorium—the status involving exploration of alternatives without commitment to any—evidenced the least amount of consistency through time. Although such findings are to be expected given the definition of terms as well as previous reports in the literature (Meeus, Schoot, Keiijsers, & Loes, 2010), here these expectations were confirmed in a small and unique sample.

The fourth goal of this research pertained to the relationship between the identity statuses and indicators of psychological well-being and significant life events. The associations were found in the expected directions. Greater use of the achieved identity status is associated with better developmental outcomes—from perceptions of greater social support and less life distress, to fewer symptoms of depression and a more positive self-perception. The frequency of use of the diffused identity status, on the other hand, is related to the same indicators, but in the opposite direction. These results are consistent with previous studies documenting a positive relationship between achieved status and well-being (e.g., see Hirschi, 2012; Ickes, Park, & Johnson, 2012; Schwartz et al., 2011; Waterman, 2007).

Although not significantly associated with any of the four identity statuses, the respondents' significant life event scores were, nonetheless, informative. Specifically, significant life events clustered around two issues: intimate partner relationships and work/occupation. Despite high life event scores indicative of stress, surprisingly few respondents were classified in the moratorium status with respect to either intimate partnerships or work/occupation at Time 2. In other words, at Time 2 few participants were questioning their choice in partner, searching for a new partner, or considering singlehood as an option to being partnered. In an earlier article examining the partner data more extensively, Dalla (2010) described the graphic inconsistencies between the women's strength, resilience, and capabilities—on the one hand—and their continued tolerance for male partners who cheated on them, abused them, drank alcohol excessively, and failed to contribute emotionally or financially to their families, on the other. Dalla (2010) concluded: "Perhaps there exist so few *alternatives* that having a partner ... despite the strain ... was viewed

more favorably than having none at all" (p. 760), thus accounting for the lack of moratorium in relation to participants' intimate partner identity statuses.

Interesting too is that, at Time 2, the women were rarely in a state of searching or exploring alternatives; moratorium was the least often assigned identity status regardless of life domain examined. Thus, despite experiencing numerous disequilibrating events in areas related to work/occupation and intimate partner relationships, such stress did not translate into identity status reformulation through questioning or searching for alternatives (i.e., movement to a state of moratorium) as expected from the literature. These results suggest that moratorium-achievement cycles (see Stephen, Fraser, & Marcia, 1992) considered *normative* in adult identity development, may have limited utility in unique environmental contexts that severely attenuate opportunities for experimentation, exploration, and self-examination.

When considering the developmental changes in identity over time, it is important to keep the population in mind. These women are former adolescent mothers residing in a reservation context characterized by enormous academic, social, and economic challenges; that they were at risk for a host of detrimental long-term outcomes is readily apparent (Szlemko, Wood, & Thurman, 2006). Yet, as adults, the majority (*n* = 16 or 76%) were classified as achieved with respect to two of the four life domains (i.e., maternity and work/occupation). This was not expected. It is clear that their ability to define themselves, first and foremost, as mothers and providers, is a testament to their resiliency and ability to overcome the difficulties associated with early parenting, and particularly in an ecology marked by deprivation. That their children's well-being was the top priority for most, for more than 15 years, suggests that teenage mothers comprise a heterogeneous group whose developmental outcomes and life trajectories (as well as those of their children) cannot be predetermined on the basis of demographic markers (e.g., age, income). No other investigations examining the adult identity status of former adolescent mothers could be located in the extent literature. However, the teenage birth rate on the Navajo Reservation continues to exceed national statistics (16.9% vs. 12.7%; Joe, 2004), suggesting a need for research into the processes that promote exploration and role commitments among such unique populations.

Limitations and Strengths

In terms of limitations, the generalizability of results is limited because of sample size and location (i.e., two Navajo communities) from which data were collected. Future research with a larger sample and one more representative of the entire Navajo Reservation is warranted. Also, data were collected from the now-adult adolescent mothers only. Research including multiple sources (e.g., partners, children) would provide additional insight into teenage mothers' development across multiple social and ecological contexts. An additional limitation is the amount of time between data collection points. Had data been collected more frequently across the 15 years, nuances in the processes underlying identity development across the four life domains might have been more readily apparent.

This investigation contributes to the extant literature in several respects. First, despite the extensive literature focusing on teenage parenting populations, only a handful of studies have followed adolescent mothers for more than a decade (for exceptions, see Apfel & Seitz, 1996; Kalil & Kunz, 2005; Oxford et al., 2005). Moreover, the sample represents an understudied and overlooked segment of the population—namely, Native American women. To date, no other studies exploring the developmental changes among Native American teenage mothers exist. Further, although the sample size was small, few participants were lost to attrition between data collection points. Thus, an extensive amount of survey and interview data are available from the majority of participants at Time 1 and Time 2, allowing for rich analyses and deep examination of variables of interest. Last, this investigation represents a multifaceted approach to the examination of identity and therefore provides multiple lenses through which to view the phenomena of interest.

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